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ABSTRACT

The Managing Independent Living Program provides instruction in reasoning skills to analyze career and life planning, housing, and consumer needs of persons in transition. Although the program was implemented and tested with adult female offenders, it is readily adaptable to both institutionalized and noninstitutionalized persons and for secondary school instruction. Cognitive skills emphasized in the curriculum include the ability to conceptualize problems; analyze situations; set priorities and goals; develop a decision-making process; generate alternatives; locate, organize, assess, process, and use information; determine controllable and uncontrollable elements in a situation; predict consequences; and structure time and events. For example, participants think through how they might change the level of economic resources available to them. Group and individualized instruction are used; participants work on their own goals and problems and move through the process at their own rate. The program has been successful for participants with a wide range of intellectual abilities and fosters cooperation between universities, state agencies, institutions, and the community. (Author/KC)

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The Managing Independent Living Program and the Development of Reasoning Processes

Presentation to the Affiliated Directors of the Joint Council on Economics Education and Center Directors

by Ruth G. Thomas

Kansas City, Missouri

October 7, 1982

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I appreciate this opportunity to share with you a brief overview of the Managing Independent Living Program. The Managing Independent Living Program is designed for adults who are in transition - that is, for adults who are approaching or experiencing a transition to greater independence and responsibility in their living situation. The program is intended for adults who can benefit from developing intellectual competencies and attitudes that facilitate independence in thought and action. The program was implemented and tested with adult-female offenders in the Minnesota Correctional Facility for Women. This facility, located in the Twin City metropolitan area, houses felony offenders.

An independent living situation is defined as one in which the individual has responsibility for identifying, analyzing and solving problems, for setting and achieving goals, for determining and prioritzing needs of self and possibly others, for making decisions, and for providing and managing resources.

When an individual is institutionalized, many decisions are made for the person. The individual develops a degree of dependence on the institution. In returning to the community, individuals must be able to rely on their own thinking powers and direct their own life. Consequently, the MIL program is directed at the problems of institutionalized persons returning to the community and their need for reasoning skills. However, the program has been developed in such a way that it is also appropriate for noninstitutionalized persons who are confronting the need to assume greater responsibility for themselves and more independence from societal "institutions" (e.g. a family, a school)

which have previously shared decision-making with the person or which have provided decisions for the individual.

The program has been used with institutionalized male offenders and with persons in community-based corrections and mental rehabilitation programs. It has also been used with high school seniors in classroom settings. The transferability of the curriculum suggests that, not only are the reasoning skills it emphasizes generic in nature, but also that the particular problems and decisions it concerns (i.e. those associated with transitions to increased responsibility and independence for one's own life) are relevant for a wide range of audiences.

Transition periods demand new psychological perspectives regarding self and life style as well as intellectual and social skills. Despite these demands, and the presence of intrinsic motivation to learn the thinking skills bought by suddenly perceived needs, adults generally have few opportunities for education specifically focused on general intellectual skill development.

Generalizable cognitive skills addressed by the curriculum include the ability to conceptualize problems, analyze situations and circumstances; set priorities; set goals; develop a decision-making process; generate alternatives; locate, organize, assess, process, and use information; set criteria by which alternatives and outcomes can be judged, differentiate controllable from uncontrollable elements in situations, predict consequences; and structure time and events. Instructional objectives are aimed at developing these generalizable intellectual skills by focusing on and abstracting from the participants' concrete experiences in solving problems related to community re-entry.

An example might better illustrate these general processes associated with reasoned decision-making and how they are taught. A typical goal of participants is to consider life styles they desire for themselves. This line of thinking inevitably gets around to the question of levels of economic resources that are and can be made available.

Participants think through how they might change the level of economic resources available to them. Typically this means obtaining training for employment which can provide steady income but it has also involved investment decisions. Participants begin to see what the limitations are on their abilities to secure economic resources and how they might remove some of those limitations. In this process they are identifying elements of their lives that they can control, what things are really important to them, and they are weighing costs against benefits.

A two-dimensional structure underlies the curriculum. Reasoning, decision-making, problem-solving, and management processes provide one dimension of the structure. The process takes the individual from a point where the need for a decision or action is perceived, through a conceptualization and categorization of the problem, through an investigation of alternatives, to deciding between alternatives, and through implementing the decision. The process model is designed to accommodate the "back and forth" human experience with decision-making and to develop the ability to be more systematic in applying decision-making processes.

The second dimension of the curriculum is the three problem areas to which participants apply the process. These areas are career and life planning, housing, and consumer goods and services. All three

problem areas are focused on developing goals and action related to the transition to community life. By working through the same process in more than one problem area, participants are helped to abstract and generalize essential elements of the process.

Group and individualized instructional modes are used. Participants work on their own goals and problems. They move through the process and through the problem categories at their own rate. Only those problem categories of concern to an individual participant are used with that person.

A 323-page program manual contains the curriculum for group and individualized instruction, guidelines for program development, an annotated bibliography of reference materials, a directory of community resources, and guidelines and materials for evaluating participants and the program.

Finally I'd like to summarize those elements of the program that have been the most exciting and interesting to me.

1) The program's emphasis on teaching reasoning processes. The program represents a process approach to developing complex intellectual skills, including reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making and management. The recognition of that basic underlying structure in program design that this award exemplifies is particularly gratifying.
2) The links that the program helps participants develop between reasoning and organizing and managing one's life both in the long run and on a daily basis.
3) The transferability apparent in the program.

4) Challenges associated with the test population. This population represents a very wide range of intellectual ability. Exposure to and development of reasoning processes has not typically been part of the participants' experience. The ability of the program to serve persons with high, middle and low intelligence levels in what I would identify as especially challenging circumstances has been more than encouraging.

5) The model of inter-institutional and inter-agency cooperation the program represents. Three types of higher education institutions were involved in the development phase: A big 10 University, a local community college, and a local vocational institute. Cooperation between higher education and the state is expressed in the involvement of the state prison for women, the state corrections agency and the state education agency. Finally, cooperation between the community and higher education is exemplified by the host of community agencies who were involved in program development and who continue to be involved in program operation. I'd like to close by saying that the involvement of this wide range of community, state, and higher education representatives has added a richness to the program that would probably not have otherwise been achievable.

6) The interest in and support for the program. It was funded in 1981 on a continuing basis by the Minnesota legislature as part of the budget for the Minnesota Correctional Institution for Women. The program manual has been requested by and distributed to programs and institutions in 37 states and Canada.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the Joint Council and Marvin Power for this recognition and for their commitment to the teaching of reasoning processes. The award will be used to continue research in the area of cognitive processes and development and to provide educational grants to selected MIL program participants.

Finally, I thought you should know something about my background. I am not in corrections. My background is in education. I have taught at junior high, senior high, adult and college levels, have organized several community-based educational programs, and have been in educational roles in business. I have always had special interest in the development and teaching of cognitive processes and in consumer education. These interests have been expressed in several curriculum and program development projects and in my research.

Currently, I am Head of the Home Economics Education Division at the University of Minnesota. I was privileged to be a participant in the 1980 Consumer Institute for teacher educators that was sponsored by the Joint Council and held in St. Louis.